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IN
SUBJECT: DAS FEIGENBAUM MEETS BRAJESH MISHRA AND M.K.
RASGOTRA

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (U) Summary: Two of Delhi's top foreign policy experts, former National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra and former Foreign Secretary M.K. Rasgotra, told visiting SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum that the civil nuclear initiative is may yet move through the governing coalition but only with a demonstration of political will from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi; future Indian foreign policy will be shaped by efforts to improve relations simultaneously with China and the US. In separate meetings, each of the greybeards postulated that relations with China will be characterized by engagement and rivalry, whereas relations with the US, only by engagement. The candid conversations covered a wide range of topics including domestic Indian politics, the civil nuclear initiative, relations with China and the US, Iran, Sri Lanka, the future of Indian foreign policy, and whether India has a national security strategy. End Summary.

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Former National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra
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Mishra on the Civil Nuclear Deal

12. (C) Former National Security Advisor in the BJP Vajpayee government, Brajesh Mishra, told DAS Feigenbaum that he saw fissures within both the Congress Party and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition on how to respond to the Communist challenge on the US-India civil nuclear deal. An influential group in the Congress Party does not want to risk a confrontation with the Left parties, thus forcing the government into caution on the initiative. As for the UPA, Mishra drew attention to the opposition of several allies on any action on the nuclear deal that would jeopardize the UPA government. He placed in this camp Railway Minister and Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalu Prasad Yadav, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and Dravidia Munnetra Kazhagam supremo M. Karunanidhi, and Agriculture Minister and Nationalist Congress Party head Sharad Pawar.

13. (C) Mishra stated his belief that the civil nuclear deal is still possible but will only move forward if the Prime

Minister and the Congress Party President, Sonia Gandhi, show some political will. He doubted the Left parties would bring the UPA government down if Congress pushed forward with the agreement. Mishra said the Left parties are in no position to face an election: they will respond by loudly opposing the UPA action, and declaring that they are changing their relationship with the UPA to providing only "issue-based" support to the government. But this would allow the government to remain in power while permitting the communists a face-saving retreat. He professed his support for Manmohan Singh on this issue but lamented that he "cannot provide the Prime Minister with the political will that is needed."

Mishra on What Went Wrong

¶4. (C) Mishra stated the U.S. and Indian governments had been "over-ambitious" in their pursuit of the nuclear agreement. Still, the deal could have been clinched had mistakes not been made on both sides. On the Indian side, he blamed the Prime Minister, in particular, who he claimed was too politically inept to bring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), much less the Communists, along. He asked rhetorically, "how do you not take into account" until the last minute the communists, whose 62 MPs are critical to the survival of the government.

¶5. (C) Mishra blamed the Prime Minister for taking BJP support for granted. Singh, he said, had simply calculated that "since the BJP started us down this road, they will support the deal." Meanwhile, the Prime Minister failed to reach out to the BJP, meeting with BJP leaders Vajpayee and Advani only once, and only after 18 months in office.

NEW DELHI 00000270 002 OF 003

Instead, the Prime Minister had sent career bureaucrats to brief Mishra, apparently counting on Mishra to then press the deal on the leadership of the BJP. Former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and current Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon had briefed him several times, said Mishra, but he had reminded them that they needed to talk to BJP political leaders, which even they had failed to do. Mishra said the Parliamentary debate is over and it is now up to the Prime Minister and the Congress Party President to move the nuclear agreement forward. He noted that "internationalizing" the deal by initialing agreements with other countries might be helpful, but the onus is still on Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi to demonstrate leadership on the issue.

¶6. (C) On the US side, meanwhile, Mishra argued that the insertion of Iran into the debate on US-India civil nuclear ties had had a wholly negative impact on the deal. Congressmen Lantos and Ackerman had linked the deal to India's relationship with Iran. The clear message to India, then, had been that the sacrificing the Indo-Iran relationship was the quid pro quo that India was being forced into in exchange for the nuclear deal. Mishra observed that he had warned US lawmakers, including Senator Biden and Congressmen Lantos and Ackerman, not to link the US-India relationship with the Indo-Iran relationship in this way. He had told them India would support US efforts to ensure Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons but "don't come to us for regime change in Iran." Mishra added that Under Secretary Burns' decision to retire could only be interpreted as a signal that the US was downgrading India and losing enthusiasm for the deal. DAS Feigenbaum told a skeptical Mishra that this absolutely was not the case.

Mishra on What Next in the US-India Relationship

¶7. (C) Mishra stressed that the civil nuclear deal would lead to a "sea change" in the US-India strategic and bilateral relationship. The challenge, then, would be to salvage other parts of the broad relationship in case the nuclear deal fails to go through. It would be imperative to

deal with larger questions of sanctions. Also, he argued that the greatest threat facing the two countries is growing jihadist influence in the region. President Karzai and NATO, he said, had failed to stabilize Afghanistan. Pakistan, which at one time had been supporting the Taliban, is now unable to control the radicals. Mishra saw the "increasing radicalization of 500 million Muslims" in South Asia as an existential threat to India as well as a serious danger to the United States. Mishra called for an intensive US-India dialogue on this issue. On Pakistan, he advised that the best outcome would be for the moderate democratic forces of Zardari/Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif to unite and for the Army to support them in reasserting control of Pakistani politics and society. He agreed fully with the GOI's policy of silence on recent political developments in Pakistan. While satisfied that the Indo-Pakistan dialogue is continuing, he saw little hope for a break-through in the short term because "Musharraf is in no position to make a deal with India."

Mishra on Domestic Political Schedule

¶8. (C) Mishra assessed that national elections in India would take place in the fall of 2008. State assembly polls in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Delhi may be timed to coincide with the national election in the fall. He predicted the BJP will fare very well in the Karnataka state assembly elections, which will put added pressure on the Congress Party. Mishra expects the Karnataka polls in the March-April timeframe.

----- Former Foreign Secretary M.K. Rasgotra -----

Two Nodes of Indian Foreign Policy: China and the US

NEW DELHI 00000270 003 OF 003

¶9. (SBU) In a wide ranging discussion of Indian foreign policy, former Ambassador to the UK and France and former Foreign Secretary M.K. Rasgotra delineated two large nodes of Indian foreign policy: relations with China and relations with the US. He did not foresee a solution to India's border problem with China in the next ten years. "Time will freeze the border," he predicted. Rasgotra noted Chinese apprehensiveness at the growing India-US relationship, adding that it is the Chinese, with their enormous economic relationship, who are actually closer to the US. In his view, India will always have a relationship of rivalry and engagement with China, whereas with the US, it will just be engagement. From his extensive conversations in elite Delhi political circles he believes both the Congress and the BJP want deeper relations with the US. "With China, there will always be reservations."

Rasgotra on Iran

¶10. (SBU) Rasgotra told DAS Feigenbaum he thought the USG should engage more and "talk" with Tehran. He did not think the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline would ever become a reality and said India had no interest in Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state. DAS Feigenbaum reiterated USG's opposition to the pipeline, noting some of the reasons for that opposition. But the two then turned to developments in Turkmenistan, including the possibility of Turkmen gas moving southward through Afghanistan instead of Iran. Wrapping up on Iran, Rasgotra plainly stated, "Do whatever you want to do. Our people will make a lot of noise and not do anything."

Sri Lanka: No Solution While Prabhakaran Alive

¶11. (SBU) Rasgotra opined that there would be no solution

while LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was still alive. He said he couldn't blame the Sri Lankan government for the recent end of the truce and the return to military confrontation. Rasgotra further stated he thought some form of devolution should be put in place. DAS Feigenbaum emphasized the need for a devolution proposal credible to moderate Tamils adding that any such plan, even if it came out of the All Party Representative Conference, could not pass the current Parliament. The former Foreign Secretary concurred, but added, "We need to keep pushing him in that direction." Rasgotra finished by acknowledging that New Delhi and Washington share similar thinking on Sri Lanka. Feigenbaum and Rasgotra also discussed China, Central Asia, Turkey, and India's foreign policy.

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